

Like Jenga  
written by Tony DiGerolamo  
Copyright 2013

It was times like this when Wilby really hated his job. He had been sitting with the guards for six hours playing some sort of medieval version of Dominos and listening to their boring stories of bravado. He was sweating in his armor or rather the armor he had "borrowed" from the guard that was supposed to be here. That was when, finally, Charles Barrington arrived.

Barrington was just another guard stationed at the castle in 1450. An insignificant gnat, historically speaking, except for one fact Wilby was about to change. Wilby almost felt sorry for the man. Here he was, alive in his prime, with no idea that his only legacy would be a tiny entry in Wikipedia he'd never see. And Wilby was here to delete that entry.

Almost on cue, Thomas Malory, one of the castle prisoners, turned the corner with a crossbow in one hand and a guard in a headlock in the other. Only Barrington would see him in time.

"Malory!" said the soon-to-be-ex-historical guard.

As Barrington to go his feet, he slipped his loaded crossbow into his hand. Malory shoved his hostage into the crowd of other guards knocking them over and went sprinting for the window on the third floor. Wilby shoved Barrington to the ground just before he could shoot the famous author in the back. Malory would dive into the moat and swim away, adding to the historic author's legend.

The other guards headed for the staircase in a fruitless effort to stop the escaping prisoner. Barrington turned to Wilby, furious.

"Why did you do that?!" he demanded.

"It was an accident, I--- I stumbled," said Wilby.

"I should kill you."

Wilby dropped the pretense and his bad English accent.

"Look," he said, "I'm not a guard here. I had to stop you from killing Thomas Malory."

"What? Why?"

"Malory's a great author. He writes Le Morte d'Arthur, it's a classic. I mean, yeah, he's a complete asshole. A rapist, a thief--- Don't blame you for wanting to lock him up, but I couldn't let you kill him. Not what my client wanted."

"You speak nonsense!" said Barrington, raising his crossbow.

"Oh, if you only understood," sighed Wilby, pulling the iPhone out of his pocket.

"Listen, time is very complicated and history is like a game of Jenga. Your piece just has to go."

"**You're** the one that's going," assured Barrington.

Barrington fired the crossbow, striking Wilby square in the chest just as the phone app had told him. On cue, the time app open a swirling hole just long enough for Wilby to fall through along with half domino and part of a plate. The crossbow bolt ricocheted back through the time portal striking Barrington in the eye, killing him. Falling back and landing on the sidewalk on the other side of portal, Wilby watched Barrington's confused

expression as the guard's arm fell limp and the time portal closed. Wilby checked the iPhone.

"2013. Hmm, not a good year," he muttered.

Wilby ditched the armor in the shrubs on some nameless suburban street. The kinetic vest, which had saved his life from the crossbow bolt, he kept. He had some grungy clothes from 1966, his previous stop, underneath the armor. They would do until he could find a change of clothes.

The iPhone beeped, the app having calculated his location and time period. April 18, 2013, San Francisco. His client had forwarded another gig to him. As always, there was a "whoosh" sound as the app transported something into his pocket. Wilby found a crumpled post-it note with his client's next target.

"Lisa? That's it? They put the address, car and phone number on this, but no last name?"

Wilby sighed in exasperation. Chrono-altering was still in its infancy in his time. He had heard rumors about the dangers. Agents winking out of existence and unprofessional ones that had gone back in history to try and make a name for themselves. Most of those agents had ended up like Barrington. Deleted from history. Their opportunity diverted at a key moment.

Fortunately, Wilby had always been very professional. When you can travel in time, you literally have all the time in the world to research, so why not do the homework? This Lisa would wait even if he had to go back to this very moment in time somewhere else in San Francisco. He shot a text back to his home time. "Need last name on target, please."

In the meantime, it was time to get acclimated back to 21st century living at least. What Wilby wanted was a hot shower and a new suit of clothes. No telling what sort of parasites he had picked up in the five days he spent in 1450.

"Pawn shop," he said to the iPhone, which immediately gave him directions.

It was always easier traveling from the past to the future, since past trinkets were always worth more. The other way posed too many problems. Selling a flashlight to a Neolithic man or iPod to someone in Renaissance was way too tricky and dangerous.

Outside the pawn shop, Wilby fixed his hair as best he could with the cheap plastic comb he still was carrying from the 60's. He certainly smelled homeless, but he didn't want to look homeless. The pawn shop owner's eyes went wide upon seeing the gold necklace he had absconded with from the 15th century. A cool grand later and he was on his way.

Wilby bought himself a change of clothes and a moderately priced hotel room. He abandoned his 1966 clothes except for the comb and a pack of matches. (Both, he found, were always handy in a pinch.) He popped into the shower, only to find the water pressure wanting. Even after spending a week in medieval times, he could still complain about modern conveniences.

By a weird coincidence, he also had a washer for a showerhead in his pocket. On his previous journey to 1966, he had posed as an assistant super for two days. Rather than bothering the hotel, he used the washer to fix the showerhead himself. As he got out of the shower and dried off, he thought about the weird synchronicity of having that exact washer. At that moment, on the TV, VH1 played an old Police music video with the song of the same name.

That's when a chill ran down Wilby's spine. He had been warned during his training that strange, synchronous events were a sign of either a paradox or a major problem with the timeline. Was it possible that Barrington had somehow managed to survive the crossbow bolt, track down Malory and kill him anyway?

He'd been a fool! Blathering to someone in the past like that. The time app had shown that the kinetic vest would protect Wilby and bounce the bolt into Barrington, but did that mean he died? Not necessarily. Wilby dressed and rushed down to the lobby.

Using the local Internet connection, he checked Malory's Wikipedia entry. No, he had died in 1471, as predicted by the time app and per the client's request. Could the shower and the music video be a coincidence? Maybe he was just being paranoid. He had no reason to believe his job was anything but legitimate.

2245, his present year, had streamlined transactions and time. His job was dangerous, sure, but also fun. There was nothing like unprotected sex in the 18th century and then a quick return home for a nanonite injection to get rid of any unwanted STD's. Quite frankly, he banked so much money back home, he was really working for luxuries at this point. He could retire after this run and live comfortably. Yes, that's what he'd do.

Forget the luxuries. When you start to get paranoid it's time to get out of the time jumping business. It was time to find this Lisa and get out. He'd make it look like a street mugging. A couple of quick stabs with a steak knife he palmed at a diner, take the purse and it would all be a forgotten police report in the annals of history.

Wilby reached the street address. Parked outside was a black Kia. Still no text from HQ, but then Wilby remembered the phone number. He dialed. A woman answered.

"Lisa?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"I live a few doors down. Got your number from a friend. There's someone messing with your car outside."

"Shit. Really? Thanks, uh..."

"Wilby. I'll call the cops and then meet you downstairs."

That was almost too simple. Lisa would walk right outside into a trap. People in the far past were much harder to kill. They were always worried about personal safety. But in 2013? They were clueless

A young woman in a sports bra and running outfit came outside. She immediately looked toward the Kia. Wilby started to cross the street. It was right then another woman came out of a local Starbucks. She suddenly turned toward Wilby.

"Hey, Wilby!"

The woman flicked one of those Starbucks coffee warmers in his direction. It caught his eye for just a few seconds. Just long enough for Wilby not to see the truck barreling down the hill. The truck struck him and Wilby went flying. He briefly caught a glimpse of his iPhone sailing into oblivion. He landed hard. His ears rang, blood flowed and every bone in his body seemed shattered.

The Starbucks woman knelt over him briefly.

"Why?" he managed to intone. "Who...are you?"

"I'm from **your** future. You were about to make a very **radical** change to the timeline," she sighed taking the iPhone out of her pocket. "Time is very complicated and history is like a game of Jenga. Your piece just has to go."